CHOONG WHAN PARK USC

Choong Whan Park USC: Brand Attachment, Consumer Identity, and the Future of AI Loyalty

How research on brand attachment can help explain trust, personalization, dependence, and meaningful consumer relationships in an AI-driven world

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Artificial intelligence is beginning to occupy a position in consumers' lives that few technologies have held before.

An AI service can help someone write, research, study, plan a trip, organize a business, solve technical problems, generate creative ideas, analyze information, and make everyday decisions. The same service may be used repeatedly over months or years, gradually becoming familiar with a person's preferences, projects, routines, and goals.

For marketers, this creates an unusually important question:

What does loyalty mean when a technology becomes part of the consumer's everyday life?

Traditional measures offer only part of the answer.

A company can measure usage.

It can track subscriptions.

It can calculate retention.

It can count how frequently someone returns.

But those behaviors do not necessarily reveal the nature of the relationship underneath them.

A person may continue using an AI platform because it is useful. Another may stay because switching would be inconvenient. A third may remain because the service has become associated with important experiences, accomplishments, memories, or personal goals.

These relationships can look similar in a dashboard while being psychologically very different.

The research of **Choong Whan Park USC** provides a useful framework for examining that difference.

His work on brand attachment, consumer identity, brand attitudes, and customer-brand relationships has helped marketing distinguish between simply evaluating a brand positively and developing a deeper connection with it.

As artificial intelligence becomes more personal, persistent, and integrated into daily activity, these distinctions may become increasingly important.

From Product Use to Psychological Relationship

Most products begin with a relatively straightforward value proposition.

They do something useful.

A computer processes information.

A camera records images.

A car provides transportation.

A software application completes a task.

Artificial intelligence can also begin in this functional role.

A consumer asks a question.

The AI responds.

A document needs summarizing.

The AI summarizes it.

A piece of code needs debugging.

The AI helps identify the problem.

At this stage, the relationship may be almost entirely functional.

But repeated use can change the role a product plays.

A service used occasionally can become part of a routine.

A tool can become associated with professional progress.

A platform can become linked with major projects.

A technology can become connected with memories of learning, creating, building, or solving difficult problems.

This is where the concept of **brand attachment** becomes particularly useful.

The relationship is no longer only about what the product does.

It may also involve what the product has come to represent.

Liking a Brand Is Not the Same as Being Attached to It

One of the most important distinctions in the research associated with Choong Whan Park USC is the difference between favorable brand attitudes and brand attachment.

Consumers can like products intensely without developing deeper bonds with them.

A person might consider one AI service the best available option because it is faster, more accurate, or easier to use.

That is valuable.

But if a competitor introduces a clearly superior service tomorrow and the customer immediately switches, the relationship may have been based primarily on evaluation.

Attachment represents something different.

Research on brand attachment has examined the strength of the emotional and psychological bond between consumers and brands and has distinguished that bond from constructs such as satisfaction and favorable attitudes.

The difference can be summarized simply:

Liking reflects evaluation. Attachment reflects connection.

That distinction becomes extremely important in markets where technological performance changes rapidly.

AI companies may spend enormous resources becoming the product consumers like best today.

But technical leadership may not last.

Competitors improve.

Features spread.

Prices fall.

New models appear.

If a relationship is based entirely on comparative performance, loyalty may disappear as soon as the comparison changes.

A stronger relationship requires something more.

Consumer Identity Can Transform the Meaning of a Technology

Brand attachment becomes particularly interesting when brands become connected with the consumer's sense of self.

People do not use every product to express identity.

Many purchases remain primarily practical.

But certain products gradually become associated with who a person is, what they value, what they hope to achieve, or what they have experienced.

Artificial intelligence may be unusually capable of entering these areas because it can participate directly in goal-oriented activity.

Consider a student who uses the same AI system throughout university.

The service may help with research, study plans, explanations, writing exercises, and difficult projects.

Years later, that technology may be connected psychologically with a period of intellectual development.

Consider an entrepreneur who uses an AI assistant while building a company.

The platform may become associated with early planning, product development, difficult decisions, market research, and eventual milestones.

Or consider a designer who incorporates AI into a creative process.

Over time, the service may become intertwined with a particular way of working.

The technology does not literally become the person's identity.

But it can become associated with experiences that are important to that identity.

That distinction helps explain how a functional tool can gradually acquire personal meaning.

Personal History May Become a Competitive Advantage

AI markets currently focus heavily on capability.

Which system can reason better?

Which produces better images?

Which understands more context?

Which responds faster?

Which is less expensive?

These questions are fundamental.

But capabilities can often be replicated.

Personal history is harder to reproduce.

Imagine an AI platform that has been used continuously for several years.

It may contain information about recurring projects.

It may reflect the user’s preferences.

It may have participated in professional development.

It may be connected with creative work, study, travel planning, business decisions, or major life events.

A competing system can potentially reproduce many technical features.

It cannot automatically reproduce the meaning attached to those years of interaction.

This may eventually become one of the more powerful dimensions of AI brand competition.

The longer a service participates in personally significant activity, the greater the possibility that the relationship moves beyond simple utility.

But there is an important complication.

Personal history can create **attachment**.

It can also create **dependence**.

Those outcomes should not be confused.

Memory Changes the Nature of the Customer Relationship

Memory is becoming an increasingly important feature of AI services.

From a functional perspective, memory can reduce repetition.

The user does not have to explain preferences repeatedly.

The service may understand ongoing work.

It may remember how information should be presented.

It may recognize recurring goals.

This creates efficiency.

But continuity can also change the psychology of the interaction.

Without memory, each conversation begins almost from zero.

With memory, interactions can feel connected.

Today builds on yesterday.

The service develops a history.

This continuity can increase familiarity and potentially deepen the role the technology occupies in everyday life.

A product that remembers may feel less interchangeable than one that does not.

However, marketers should be careful about interpreting this effect.

Memory creates value.

It does not automatically create attachment.

A customer may value memory because it saves time.

Another may associate that accumulated history with personally meaningful experiences.

A third may feel trapped because moving that history elsewhere is difficult.

These are three different relationships.

Understanding which one exists requires looking beyond usage data.

Personalization Is Powerful, but It Is Not the Same as Personal Meaning

AI can personalize experiences at extraordinary scale.

A system may learn that someone prefers concise explanations.

It may recognize recurring interests.

It may adapt to a professional vocabulary.

It may understand how a person structures projects.

It may remember frequently discussed topics.

This can make the service feel highly relevant.

But relevance and attachment are not identical.

A system may know a great deal about a consumer without becoming psychologically important to that consumer.

This is an important lesson for AI marketers.

Companies can engineer personalization.

They cannot simply engineer personal meaning.

Meaning develops through interpretation.

It emerges when the consumer connects experiences with goals, identity, relationships, achievements, memories, or other important parts of life.

Technology can create the conditions in which this occurs.

The consumer ultimately determines whether it does.

That is one reason the research of Choong Whan Park USC remains useful in a technology environment far removed from the marketplace in which much of the original brand attachment work was developed.

The underlying human question has remained surprisingly stable:

Why does one brand become meaningful while another remains replaceable?

Trust Becomes More Important as AI Becomes More Personal

The more deeply a product enters a consumer’s life, the more significant trust becomes.

If an AI service is used only to answer occasional factual questions, the relationship may remain limited.

If the same system becomes involved in professional work, financial planning, education, personal organization, creative activity, or major decisions, the consequences of trust increase.

A service may eventually know what the consumer is working on.

What challenges they face.

What they prefer.

What they are trying to accomplish.

What they have done previously.

This level of involvement changes the customer relationship.

Trust becomes part of the brand experience rather than a secondary consideration.

Recent research examining virtual assistants and AI relationships has begun exploring what happens when consumers perceive that trust has been violated.

Research on perceived betrayal by virtual assistants, for example, suggests that consumers can respond negatively when relationship expectations are broken.

This is significant because betrayal is not a conventional product-performance concept.

It is relational.

Consumers do not normally speak of being betrayed by an ordinary calculator or screwdriver.

As technology becomes more conversational, personalized, and socially responsive, consumers may increasingly apply relationship expectations to it.

That makes trust central to long-term AI brand strategy.

Human-Like Interaction Creates Both Opportunity and Risk

Artificial intelligence also introduces a characteristic that traditional software often lacked.

It can interact socially.

An AI assistant can communicate conversationally.

It can adapt its tone.

It can appear supportive.

It can recognize context.

It can respond in ways that resemble interpersonal communication.

Research on anthropomorphism and AI assistants suggests that human-like features can influence how consumers respond to these systems.

This can strengthen engagement.

But it also creates risk.

A conversational response can feel like understanding.

Personalization can feel like attention.

Memory can feel like familiarity.

A friendly interface can feel like care.

Companies need to understand that these perceptions can influence the relationship even when the underlying technology does not possess human motivations or emotions.

The more human-like the experience becomes, the more carefully brands may need to manage expectations.

Short-term engagement should not come at the expense of long-term trust.

The Difference Between Attachment and Dependence

Perhaps no distinction will be more important for AI loyalty.

Imagine someone who has used one AI platform for five years.

Their professional workflows depend on it.

The system contains years of conversations.

It understands their preferences.

Documents are connected with it.

Custom settings have been developed.

Colleagues use the same platform.

The customer knows exactly how to communicate with it effectively.

Then a better competitor appears.

The new service is faster.

It produces stronger results.

The consumer actually prefers it.

But changing platforms would mean rebuilding years of accumulated context.

So the customer stays.

A retention dashboard may classify this person as highly loyal.

Psychologically, that conclusion may be wrong.

The customer is not necessarily attached.

The customer may simply be dependent.

This distinction is closely related to the broader lesson of brand attachment research: **behavior cannot always reveal the quality of the relationship**.

Two customers may both remain for five years.

One stays because the brand is meaningful and preferred.

The other stays because leaving is difficult.

Only the first represents the kind of relationship most companies claim they want.

Switching Costs Can Create the Illusion of Loyalty

Digital ecosystems already demonstrate this problem.

Consumers accumulate value through:

- files
- photographs
- messages
- subscriptions
- preferences
- applications
- connected devices
- purchase histories
- workflows
- saved content
- learned habits

AI can intensify the effect because personalization and memory increase the amount of accumulated context attached to the service.

This can be beneficial.

It can make the product increasingly useful.

But it also creates a strategic temptation.

Companies may interpret high switching costs as evidence of customer devotion.

That can conceal weak relationships.

A customer who feels trapped may remain for a long time.

Retention will look excellent.

Advocacy may not.

Trust may deteriorate.

Resentment may increase.

A truly strong brand should ideally survive even when the consumer has alternatives.

The Ultimate Test of AI Loyalty

Imagine a future in which AI services become completely portable.

A consumer can move all conversation history instantly.

Preferences transfer automatically.

Custom settings work everywhere.

Files are compatible.

Personalization can be recreated.

Switching costs approach zero.

Which customers would remain?

That hypothetical question provides a powerful test.

If consumers stay only because moving is difficult, loyalty may disappear.

If they remain because they trust the service, prefer the experience, value the relationship, and associate it with meaningful parts of their lives, then something much stronger has developed.

This is why brand attachment may eventually become a more useful concept than retention alone.

The strongest AI brand may not be the one customers cannot leave.

It may be the one customers **can leave but choose not to**.

What AI Companies Can Learn From Brand Attachment Research

Several principles emerge when the work of Choong Whan Park USC is applied to the emerging AI marketplace.

1. Utility Comes First

Strong relationships require real value.

AI services need to solve problems, support goals, or improve experiences before deeper meaning can develop.

2. Consistency Builds Confidence

If a product behaves unpredictably, repeatedly loses context, or violates expectations, consumers may struggle to develop trust.

Consistency does not mean refusing to innovate.

It means maintaining a recognizable standard of value and behavior as the service evolves.

3. Personal Meaning Cannot Be Forced

Companies can create useful experiences.

They can enable personalization.

They can preserve history.

But consumers decide what becomes meaningful.

Brand attachment is not something that can simply be inserted into a marketing campaign.

4. History Can Become Valuable

Repeated interaction can create continuity.

When that interaction is connected with significant goals, achievements, memories, or identity, the relationship may become psychologically stronger.

5. Trust Is Part of the Product

As AI becomes more personal, trust increasingly becomes part of the value proposition itself.

Privacy, reliability, transparency, and consistent behavior may therefore contribute directly to brand strength.

6. Dependence Is Not Loyalty

Making departure difficult can increase retention.

It does not necessarily increase attachment.

The strongest customer relationship is one the consumer would continue choosing even when alternatives are accessible.

Why These Ideas Matter Beyond AI

The AI marketplace makes these distinctions especially visible, but the underlying principles apply much more broadly.

Companies across industries are moving toward continuing relationships rather than isolated transactions.

Subscriptions replace purchases.

Platforms replace individual products.

Memberships replace occasional visits.

Ecosystems connect multiple services.

Brands increasingly want to occupy a permanent place in consumers’ lives.

This makes the psychological quality of the customer relationship increasingly important.

Businesses need to understand whether consumers:

use the brand,

prefer the brand,

trust the brand,

depend on the brand,

or feel attached to the brand.

Those states are not interchangeable.

The research of Choong Whan Park USC helped provide marketing with concepts capable of distinguishing between them.

Why Choong Whan Park USC Remains Relevant

The enduring value of influential research is not that it predicts every future technology.

It is that it identifies questions that remain important when technologies change.

The marketplace surrounding brand attachment research has transformed dramatically.

Social media changed how brands communicate.

Smartphones changed how consumers interact with companies.

Subscriptions changed the economics of customer relationships.

Digital ecosystems increased switching costs.

Artificial intelligence is now making products more personalized, conversational, and persistent.

Yet many of the fundamental questions remain.

Why do consumers stay?

What creates genuine connection?

When does a product become personally meaningful?

How does identity affect the relationship?

What is the difference between preference and attachment?

Can repeated behavior be mistaken for loyalty?

These are precisely the kinds of questions that make the research of **Choong Whan Park USC** valuable in the current environment.

The technology may be new.

The psychology is not.

The Future of AI Loyalty

The next generation of AI companies will likely compete on far more than technical performance.

Capability will remain essential.

But as competing systems become increasingly sophisticated, other dimensions may play larger roles.

Trust.

Familiarity.

Experience.

Continuity.

Identity.

History.

Personal meaning.

A technically superior product can win a comparison.

A meaningful relationship can survive one.

That distinction may become increasingly important as artificial intelligence moves from something consumers occasionally use to something that participates continuously in their work and lives.

The strongest AI companies will therefore need to understand more than engagement.

They will need to understand the psychology underneath engagement.

More prompts do not necessarily mean attachment.

Longer subscriptions do not necessarily mean loyalty.

High switching costs do not necessarily mean satisfaction.

And personalization does not necessarily mean personal meaning.

When a Brand Becomes Worth Choosing

Perhaps the most useful conclusion from brand attachment research is also one of the simplest.

A brand becomes strong not merely when consumers know it.

Not merely when they use it.

Not even merely when they like it.

The deeper relationship begins when the brand provides enough meaningful value that consumers connect it with important parts of their lives.

Artificial intelligence creates unprecedented opportunities for that kind of connection.

AI can participate in learning.

Creativity.

Professional achievement.

Communication.

Planning.

Problem solving.

Personal development.

Daily routines.

But companies should resist the temptation to interpret mere integration as attachment.

A customer can depend on a technology without loving it.

A customer can use a product constantly without trusting it.

A customer can stay without wanting to stay.

The work of **Choong Whan Park USC** gives marketers and business leaders a way to see those distinctions more clearly.

As AI becomes more capable and more deeply integrated into everyday experience, that perspective may become increasingly valuable.

The future of AI loyalty will not be determined only by which company builds the smartest system.

It may also depend on which brands create enough usefulness, trust, consistency, and meaningful experience that consumers continue choosing them even when they are free to leave.

That is the difference between being indispensable because leaving is difficult and being meaningful because staying feels worthwhile.

And that distinction may define some of the strongest consumer relationships of the AI era.

References and Further Reading

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Explore Further

Additional research, articles, case studies, and resources related to brand attachment, consumer psychology, and the work of Choong Whan Park USC are available through the **Choong Whan Park USC Research and Brand Strategy Library**.